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3 SPEAKERS

Marylee

Kevin

Brandon

START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:00] Marylee**

Hi, I'm Stephanie J. Block. And I'm Mary Lee Fairbanks. Welcome to season three of Stage's podcast, where we continue to bring creation and connection to center stage. Hey, everybody. So you may have seen this week we had some exciting news stages podcast is teaming up with iHeart Radio, so you'll see a few changes like a refreshed logo and a few other small changes. But really nothing's going to change for you, the listener. You can still get in touch with us at our website, stagespodcast.net. You can still follow us on all the same Instagram and Facebook pages and listen to us wherever you always listen to your podcasts. So thanks so much for listening and enjoy today's episode. You. Hey everybody. Today we are down. One host, MZ BLOCK, could not be here with us, but to make up for it, I have two of the four founding members of the up until now collective. This organization is committed to inclusive, accessible and equitable working environments. It develops, quote, radically inclusive interdisciplinary work that explores language, empathy, intimacy and community. Kevin Newberry is a director of theater, opera and film. He's worked with the Cincinnati Opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Houston Grand Opera, just to name a few. And he's directed several PBS great performances. He directed the Grammy nominated Leonard Bernstein, Mass. At Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center. He also directed Candide with the Philadelphia Orchestra, starring Bradley Cooper and Carey Mulligan. We also have Brandon Kazan. Maddox They are an artist, choreographer, dancer, filmmaker and American Sign language artist. They are the grandchild of deaf adults or a goda. Brandon is an interpreter and social activist. He serves as lead liaison, providing ASL services for Lincoln Center, Park Avenue Armory, and very soon to be announced he will be interpreting at Kimberly akimbo. So we'll let you know when that happens. Brandon was featured on Stories from the Stage with PBS, The Good Fight on CBS, High Maintenance on HBO and New Amsterdam on NBC. Please, please welcome Kevin Newberry and Brandon Kazan, Madix Kevin Newberry and Brandon Kase and Maddox to stage, please. Brandon and Kevin, please come to stage.

[00:02:42] Kevin

Thank you. Hi. We're so happy to be here. Hi, Mary Lee.

[00:02:46] Marylee

Hi. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for coming in. And I was looking at all the work that you've done with the Up until Now collective. It's really fascinating. There's nothing else like it that I've ever seen out there. And I think that one of the most important things that you guys are creating is representation. When people see themselves in stories, it's really empowering. How did you guys come up with this and how did it start?

[00:03:10] Kevin

So I first met Brandon in December of 2019. So Brandon and I are our life partners and creative collaborative partners, and we met in December 2019. I saw Brandon performing at New York Live Arts here in New York City. Brandon walked out on stage and I saw them signing and dancing and really offering the incredibly unique talents that Brandon brings to the table. And I thought, I am going to spend the rest of my life with that human. And we met in the lobby after and we connected and we had a lovely evening with some of our mutual friends and we had three dates that week in December 2019. And then I went off to Houston to do a production. Brandon went to Arizona and we stayed in touch and we knew we had an amazing connection. And then when the pandemic hit, I reached out to Brandon and I said, Look, I'm in New Hampshire with my family and you should come and visit. You should come hang out. And Brandon came up to New Hampshire and essentially never left my side since then.

[00:04:26] Marylee

So you met just right before the pandemic?

[00:04:29] Kevin

Right before. And I'm very fortunate that my family lives on this former boys camp that my grandfather built in the 1950s. And so we were very fortunate to have a place in the summer of 2020 for our friends and family and shows and family to gather. We had a safe place for people to come up and have their own cabin. And so we spent the summer making meals together, sitting around the campfire, talking about ideas, making music, and the conversations that summer really circled around the future of our industry and what kind of world we wanted to live in and what kind of structures we wanted to help build. And Brandon, you should talk a little bit about what you were also doing that summer of 2020.

[00:05:20] Brandon

While we were all gathered in New Hampshire, I started taking dance and American Sign language and music and blending them together while I lived in San Francisco when I was in the circus for seven years. That's where I started to blend those three mediums together and make American Sign Language music videos. Oh, actually, during that seven years in San Francisco, the deaf community asked me to become an interpreter because my skills were very strong and they're like, Yeah, you should do that. And so I went, Sign language is your first language. Yeah, American Sign Language was my first language because my grandparents are deaf. So like you said in my bio, I'm a I'm a coda, but I'm also a. Coda Coda being a child of deaf adults, but very specifically, I'm a grand child of deaf adults, so I grew up in the same home as my grandparents and my mom, whose first language is sign language also. And then my aunts and my.

[00:06:16] Marylee

Uncle, your mom and your aunts and uncle are hearing.

[00:06:19] Brandon

That's correct.

[00:06:20] Marylee

Both your grandparents were non hearing.

[00:06:23] Brandon

Yep, they still are because they're still alive. So there's there's still there's still very deaf and they still use ASL as their first language. So and they both have a brother and a sister who are both deaf and their partners are deaf. So it was like seven deaf people who raised me, plus the hearing signing people in my in my life. So deaf culture is very strongly rooted in my heart and my soul, which actually leads to kind of what we created. So it's interesting because I grew up signing and talking with my family and sometimes turning my voice off and only using sign language and sometimes talking and signing and sometimes just talking, but not, not often just talking because it's rooted within me to use my hands to communicate and to express myself. And it is the primary way in which I express myself. It's how my brain thinks with my hands. And so oftentimes in the deaf community, people have different kinds of feelings about it's called simultaneous communication or SIM, because there are some deaf people who don't who don't use their voice. And so when you're talking with deaf people, especially those who don't use their voice, turning off your voice is a way to kind of be on the same level. Right? But there's so many people hard of hearing people who who hear and sign and use their voice. And then there's people like CODAs or people who grew up with deaf people who also use their voice and sign with with their hands. It's interesting when I'm on like a zoom call or I'm at a meeting or anything, there's oftentimes an accessibility check. So people are like, you know, is everyone feeling comfortable with the offerings that we have? Do we need subtitles? Do we need this or that? Asl interpreters, hopefully. You know, I always say that I my accessibility need is to be able to sign while I talk and because it's just.

[00:08:27] Marylee

How it's so second nature for you.

[00:08:29] Brandon

It's second nature. And I'm thinking primarily in sign language, and I'm speaking the words that I'm the concepts that I'm signing. So it's a little bit it's a little different. And it's not an easy skill to have, but it's something that I cherish and is part of who I am as a person.

[00:08:44] Marylee

Sign language is such a beautiful, beautiful language. I wish it were taught in schools. It puts you in your body and slows you down and and makes you think about what's coming out of you, both physically and verbally.

[00:09:00] Brandon

Yeah, definitely. And you know, it's the third most popular language in in America now. It's English and then Spanish and then American Sign Language. There's a lot more popularity, a lot more attention on the deaf community, on sign language in general, you know, and ASL itself is a full fledged language. It's got five parameters and it is equivalent to any spoken language also. So there's there's a lot of education around ASL and sign language and there's international signs, but we don't have an international sign language because the language requires grammar. You know, each country itself has its own sign language.

[00:09:42] Marylee

Just to back a little bit, you meet in December. The pandemic hits about March. You head up to New Hampshire to stay at Kevin's parents camp. You can all gather safely and you invite a bunch of wonderful artistic friends up to join you. And. Is that where the idea for Up until Now Collective was born?

[00:10:02] Kevin

During that time period, of course, in 2020, there were so many revolutions. There was a disability revolution. There's LGBTQI plus the trans world exploding and rights being required to be acknowledged. Brandon was in the the Home Office at my parents house interpreting online, so it was this golden age of accessibility. So Brandon was interpreting everything from protests to queer dance parties, and then Brandon would come down and we'd all make dinner together and sit around the campfire. We had some incredible, like world class musicians. We were all out of work, right? And so people came up and gathered around the fire and we made music. And Brandon would sign as our friends were singing and we made some films and music videos. And so it was this incredible incubator of, of art making and, and brainstorming about what the future would look like, because I really believe that we're coming out of the most seismic shift in how our species communicates in our lifetime, and people are desperate to connect. It's almost like we're unlearning and reversing the algorithm that was accelerated by this digital black hole of like Zoom and Instagram and being online constantly and communicating through screens.

[00:11:29] Marylee

Well, it's such a it's such an interesting thing because that digital world that connected us with Zoom and really made everything explode during COVID. But it's also the thing that's driving us apart the anonymity, the anonymity of the Internet that allows people to be so rude and unkind when they can't be held responsible for their behavior on the Internet and and the way that kids now, they get all their dopamine from scrolling, scrolling, scrolling and and not out in the world connecting and building and making and creating. So it's a strange thing. It's this counterbalance of it's the thing that's that can be extremely unhealthy, but also the thing that can be really powerful and helpful in creation.

[00:12:13] Kevin

It's really interesting. And we've as we arrived at our mission statement for our company, which is ever evolving, and we're so lucky to have so many exciting things happening with up until now collective right now. But we really center stories of empathy, intimacy and connection. Now the work itself is so inclusive, and when you look at the content that we've made and the art that we've made, hopefully it speaks for itself. We we make the kind of work that when people come by our dinner tables, our opening nights or our screenings, we often get the the response, How do you all know each other and what are you doing at the same table? And could I get a seat at that table?

[00:12:57] Marylee

Yeah.

[00:12:57] Kevin

What an interesting group of people you've gathered. And we work with deaf folks and blind folks and queer folks and recenter stories that have been left out of the narrative. But we've really come down to we really boil it down to stories about intimacy and empathy and connection. And what does it mean to reconnect after this seismic shift in how we communicate as a species? And it's been a beautiful adventure. It's like our worlds have collided. And I come from the opera and theater and film world, and Brandon is a choreographer and a filmmaker and a disability liaison and activist, and suddenly we're just gathering these incredible groups of people and we're all learning from each other every day, and we're all willing to be wildly out of our comfort zone. I mean, I've been in several rehearsal rooms and film shoots where I'm in the minority as the one of the few hearing people, and I need the interpreter and most of the room is deaf. And we did this one music video for the Amazing Latchkey on Broad stream and and everyone in the video was deaf or blind. And we had one deaf blind performer who uses tactile sign language. And suddenly we're we're filming a level of communication that we maybe haven't seen before.

[00:14:20] Kevin

And it's not like the deaf and blind communities sit around hanging out in some disability club, right? It's like we're trying to bring people together and suddenly the the deaf folks are helping the, the blind folks know where to go using touch to help guide them. And the blind folks are dancing to the music and helping the deaf folks feel the rhythm and. And then us able bodied folks that are surrounding them in our kind of extended career chosen family community. We're all on the same dance floor telling the same story, and every one of them was like, Wow, what? What is this? We haven't actually seen this yet. So we've just been following our hearts to the to the people and the stories that that make us see the world in a different way. And it's been this extraordinary, inspiring period for us. Not without its challenges, which, of course, we can get into. I mean, it was not an easy time to be so disconnected, but we just kept making things Marylee That's the thing. It's like we we're only happy when we're making things.

[00:15:26] Marylee

I wanted to tell you when I was looking at some of your Instagram posts, I saw that there's a sign in your home that reads to affect as many people as we can in the most positive way possible. And I just first of all, I love that. But I wanted you to know that when Stef and I started stages, we we wrote something like a mission statement, except we call it our living document because we sort of see it as something that's alive and should always be changing and growing, just like anything.

[00:15:57] Kevin

a living document. I love that. That's so wonderful.

[00:15:59] Marylee

But I wanted you to know that I'm tweaking our living document to to copy that little thing that I saw behind you in your Instagram post.

[00:16:08] Brandon

Oh, that's so moving. That actually came from when I was 16 years old and we were asked to I think the question or the prompt was like, What is your motto? And I came up with that when I was 16.

[00:16:25] Marylee

Oh God, 16. Yeah, I wasn't thinking those thoughts when I was 16. Let's talk a little bit about the mid light moment that you created in Times Square where everything was lit up at midnight. What was that whole project?

[00:16:39] Brandon

This one idea that we had early on, we had a commission from this wonderful streaming service called Broad Stream to make a series of ASL music videos, which we called the Soul Signs. And the first idea we had was a version of Gladys Knight and the Pips Midnight Train to Georgia. We had that idea sitting here in our living room in the middle of the pandemic, and that idea ended up in Times Square as part of the midnight moment in July of 2021. We were lucky to have a piece in the New York Times profiling our work on the Soul Science Series. And then when the Midnight Moment Square folks called us, we were we were so honored. And to see that piece on 85 plus screens every night at midnight in July, like two beautiful non binary black deaf community members doing Gladys Knight and the Pips, especially right now with these culture wars against queer people raging in such terrifying ways around this country. And it felt like the universe telling us, Oh, you should do more of that kind of work. And we also had a big performance that we presented in Times Square using sign language and music. And we had dancers.

[00:17:59] Kevin

We had about 30 performers, and it was pouring rain that night. We'd rehearsed all day. We were just about to set up for our 1130 show around 1030. And then the sky opened up and it poured rain and we all went into the studio. We were just checking the weather reports. It was one of those things that we never could have gathered that group of people together again. I mean, it would have been impossible. And then at like 20 minutes to midnight, it cleared. We ran out into Times Square. We thankfully, we have footage of all of this. It'll all be in a documentary someday. And we were like plugging in instruments and wiping off surfaces and then suddenly, like, out from under the scaffolding came hundreds of people that had been waiting to see this performance. And everyone was there to support this and to see the look on everyone's faces when they got to see sign language and frankly, queer culture written large on all of those screens in Times Square, it was a truly galvanizing moment. And to see up until now, collective on 85 screens in Times Square like, well, I guess we should keep doing this.

[00:19:12] Marylee

And in such a short time. I mean, that happened in like a year, right? I mean, you started it in 2020, during the.

[00:19:18] Kevin

Pandemic happened in a year and a.

[00:19:20] Marylee

Year later. You are all over Times Square on 80 something screens. I mean, that's incredible. It's sort of what we were talking about with the Internet where there's so much negativity and division in the world. Right. I turned off the news in 2020 and I don't I don't put it on. It's not that I want to be unaware of what's happening in the world or that I want. Stick my head in the sand. It's that we have to be responsible for what we allow into our energetic space. Right? That's right. And nobody else is going to be responsible for that. And so if the world is fear mongering, making us feel that we have no power, that we're out of control, then guess what's going to happen if you absorb all that and that's what you're going through the world in. But if you decide I'm going to create my own reality and I'm going to call in the people who think the way I think and feel the way I feel, because there are more out there than we know. And all it takes is a couple of acts of courage, right, to say, hey, I'm going to create this thing. And then it's almost like the universe conspires to make it happen for you, right? So you guys decide to do this thing and a year later, it's all over Times Square and it shows that there's a need for that connection in the world and that you tapped into something. And I think it's amazing.

[00:20:41] Kevin

Thank you. It's been really inspiring. And you know, the old saying that if you ask people what they want in the early part of the 20th century, they would say they wanted a faster horse because they didn't know what a car was. Right and right. Steve Jobs always had that hanging above his desk, like be the car when people think they want a faster horse. And I and I think that we're kind of again we're reversing the algorithm people are so desperate to connect and to build new structures and how do we bring new audiences in? How do we reframe things? And we feel like we're in the middle of an artistic renaissance. It's like an intellectual, artistic renaissance, the exchange of ideas and looking at inclusion and gender expression. And we're just surrounded by artists that are that are building the future in real time. So we we feel so lucky to be a part of that.

[00:21:42] Marylee

I saw something about the wild party that you're doing a new a new concept with Andrew Lopez, the Wild Party, which I. I loved that one. So what you're going to do with.

[00:21:52] Brandon

That, You know, the Wild Party is basically my opus. Back when I was living in San Francisco, I got the opportunity to interpret Lipa's Wild Party in 2015. I was like, Whoa! The deaf community needs to own this story to not just have two ASL interpreters who come from the deaf community, but actually have deaf people and signing people on stage because the story is so much. It's a very timeless story. We're always going to have a story about domestic violence, about power struggle, about addiction and sex and music and all of these things. And these are all human issues. And I think another part of what we do and up until now collective is we focus on humanizing all people from all different walks of life and just reminding people that we are human and that we have empathy and we need connection and we thrive on intimacy. And I think that story of the Wild Party is is such a beautiful an example of all of those things now. And it was written and takes place after the last big pandemic. Right? Right. The Spanish flu, the Spanish flu and the last kind of economic downturn. And this need to party and reconnect. Yeah. And after and during prohibition. So, you know, there's there's this already, this underground energy that the government is saying, no, you can't do these things and you will not socialize.

[00:23:33] Brandon

And in this story, everyone understands that those inhibitions are there. But being underground and throwing those things away and doing what you want to do because you need it is the story of that. And then also, I mean, I came to New York for grad school at NYU for for dance and new technology. That's my MFA. And I when people understood what I have to give in sign language and for and with the deaf community, they immediately put me in all these places where deaf people are in in the city. And there's one woman, her name is Sandra mae Frank. She's she's wonderful. She was in NBC's New Amsterdam. She was part of Spring Awakening. She's a force. She's a deaf woman. She's amazing. And I got to see her in in a cabaret for one night. And she she it was a five piece band and she has a deaf woman came up on stage and there had been other singers before and and the emcee announced that defying gravity would be what she would be singing and signing. And before there was an interpreter for everything. And the interpreter sat down and she came up and the band started and the music began.

[00:24:56] Brandon

And all of us theater nerds are like, Oh my God, I love this song. And the lyrics begin, but there are no words. It's just the piano playing the melody with the band, giving the support. And Sandra is signing all of the concepts of Defying Gravity. And all of us are playing the lyrics in our minds, but we only see her hands. And there was a moment when Sandra, when the high note of bringing me down at the very end and she stomps on the on the stage and the band lifts and Sandra's hands are the only thing in the entire space that are just moving upward. It was amazing. And I was like, This is it. This is the future of deaf and signing theater because everything else is under control of hearing people. And what that was was a collaboration between musicians who can be hearing or deaf or hard of hearing and a deaf person who's on stage who's signing and owning the music and not relying on another hearing person. So the big conceit of the Wild Party is taking away the human voice. So the instrumentalist double the vocal line, and there is no English language vocal singing or the.

[00:26:16] Marylee

Entire show.

[00:26:18] Kevin

For the entire show. That's right. And so instead we have a queeny, for example, who's assigned as an alto saxophone. And so she and her instrumentalists have a relationship throughout the entire show.

[00:26:30] Marylee

When you really think about it, right? I mean, you come from opera, right? Kevin Yeah. So opera is the same thing When I go to the opera, I have no idea what they're saying. I don't speak. The languages, but yet I'm you get riveted in this story. You follow the story because the meaning behind the words is told through so much more than just the words.

[00:26:52] Kevin

That's right.

[00:26:53] Marylee

And and it's the same thing at ballet, right? You go to a ballet, there's no words. But yet we follow the story. We our hearts break when she dies. I mean, you're in it without the words. And so this almost seems like how did nobody come up with this before? Do you know what I'm saying? It's like, well, of course, this is what should happen when you take away what we've always relied on almost as second nature, which is hearing the words to understand the story. It forces us to change and go into that place of discomfort because the only way you can change is to go through a place of discomfort or unknowing. Right? And if you find the vulnerability to step into that place it's from, it can create a magical experience not only for the people on stage, but for the people watching who have allowed themselves to go there.

[00:27:42] Brandon

Oh, really does inspire like a sense of magic. I'm glad to use the word magic and wonder. It's all inspiring and and at its best, you don't know if the saxophone is making Queenie hands move or if her hands are actually making the music come out of the saxophone. And there's this kind of interplay of music and connection. And every time we're in the room with these musicians and deaf performers and dancers, the our jaws are all on the floor because they're like, actually, this is as one of our friends said at the workshop, this is like jazz plus it's like a a new kind of jazz music to watch the physicality of sign language and dance without the vocal line with instrumentalists. The other thing with the Wild Party is we are enjoying discovering the different moments where where the deaf person is in control of the music and not the not the music, not the conductor or not the instrumentalists, but actually the deaf person is giving the cue or using a gesture or stomping their foot. And they're the ones who are initiating the music. Because when I have seen opera or when I've seen musical theater, I or straight theater, I am always craving more facial expressions, more gesture and more movement with the body, because that is what I grew up with. That's how I see people communicate. So when I see park and park or I just see people like talking and moving a little bit, it's just it's never enough for me. And I'm like, I haven't seen what I want to like, what I want to see yet.

[00:29:19] Marylee

Vanilla ice cream with no toppings at all.

[00:29:22] Kevin

Right? Right.

[00:29:22] Marylee

Delicious in its own way, but. Oh, that's some toppings. Yeah, that's correct. But you know, there is a beauty, too, to just standing center stage and finding stillness in your and and this your voice is what moves people. There's a beauty to that. But we've seen that beauty a lot. So I think it's time for some new, new toppings, new color, like how wonderful. Well, I think this sounds like such an amazing project. You know how they often say when you lose a sense, other senses become very heightened, right? So if you can't see, you have very keen hearing or sense of touch. But what I'm wondering is, does the deaf community interpret this vision when they're sitting in the audience and they're seeing what I'm seeing is their interpretation richer because they. Get to tap into something that I can't relate with innately. I have to sit and be open to really relate because it's not a world that I'm a part of or that I can understand. So does it. Does a deaf person sit in that audience and tap into something that I can't as a hearing person?

[00:30:33] Kevin

One thing that is so special is working with all of these deaf people on stage. We have Monique Holt, who Momo, and she's the co-director of Wild Party, but she has been with me from the first step of the Wild Party, from my first creations. And she said something really profound in the beginning of our interviews, or she said, For me, music is breath and music is your heartbeat, and I don't have to hear the music in order to stay and keep a rhythm and understand the sense of it and to watch Monique move through a piece of music with choreography and with sign language with consistency. As a deaf woman, a profoundly deaf woman is just so moving. And those are those are things that we as hearing people, we don't totally understand, Right? Because we can.

[00:31:28] Marylee

There is a thing called vibrational synchronization. Do you know what that is? Yeah. We're standing on a stage and we are singing, which causes a vibration. That vibration then goes out to the audience, links the heartbeats of all in the audience, and it's literally one heartbeat under the roof, right? So that's me. That's the meaning of theater. So it sounds like that there's being a deaf person. It's allowing someone like Momo or anyone like Momo who's profoundly deaf to access something that's innate to them, that we it's in us, but we're unaware of it. And that's incredible.

[00:32:05] Kevin

And we're going even further with that. There's a company called Music Not Impossible, so they are one of the companies pioneering the wearable haptics technology where you feel the vibrations of the music and the story on sensors on your body. So we just did this installation called Mid-air for some time at the Center for Performance Research, and we're remounting it as part of the Real Abilities Film Festival in a couple of months. It hasn't been announced yet and we essentially the film that we made Full Circle in Freedom New Hampshire in the summer of 2020 called Up until Now about chosen family and Transformation. Brandon turns into a mermaid spoiler alert and finds their their queer chosen family. And we worked with a vibro composer to take the score by the amazing Gregory Spears and and program the score and the sound effects of that film on to the sensors on the body. And so in this installation, people come into the space, they watch the film, they feel the film and the story and the music on their body. We also have not all people.

[00:33:15] Marylee

Deaf people, everybody feels it.

[00:33:17] Kevin

[00:33:17] Marylee

You feel this?

[00:33:18] Kevin

Everybody feels it. Yeah. We have audio description for the blind. And then we took it a step further and we had a live cellist after the film. So you're feeling the vibration of a cello in the room and comparing that to the vibration of the technology and the audio effect of of for hearing folks of the soundtrack. And then Brandon and capably, two of the stars of the film come into the space and model consent and ask the audience if they have permission to touch their arm. When they touch their arm, the whole space change color with the bowing of a cello, and suddenly we're modeling synesthesia, consent, touch. And it was an experiment. It was the Center for Performance Research. So we were investigating what this might mean. Can this technology make you feel more connected? Out of 120 people. Mary Lee 117. Yes, please touch my arm. Yeah. And the three that said no still had a very meaningful moment, thanked us after and said, I've never been in a space where I was given permission to say, No, I'm neurodivergent. And so suddenly we're investigating Neurodiverse agency and consent and permission alongside the vibration technology. So that's the kind of work that we're doing on a daily basis.

[00:34:37] Marylee

I don't know if you guys do yoga, but when you do yoga, vibrational sound healing, that's what you do. You sit in like a a dome and you bang gongs and and singing bowls and they're set to different vibrations. So literally your watery body, because our bodies are like 60% water, I think almost resets itself and heals and releases. So not only are you creating a space for entertainment, a space for connection, but it's a space for healing as well. Yes. And it's all byproducts of what you're doing.

[00:35:08] Kevin

Pretty amazing. Yeah. Thank you.

[00:35:15] Marylee

Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood? How did you grow up? Were you in very creative homes?

[00:35:20] Kevin

Sure I can. I can go first. I was very lucky to grow up in a family of essentially camp counselors. It's so interesting having everyone come up to to Camp Freedom in the summer of 2020. And we've I've made several movies up there. I'm always bringing artists and friends up there. But now we've taken it to an even deeper level by hosting things annually. And I had a friend say to me once when when he first came up like, Oh, Kevin, it makes sense now. You come from a family of camp counselors. My mom was a kindergarten teacher her whole life, and my dad was like a a ski coach and a racer and was always teaching people how to ski and how to how to kayak. And so I grew up in a very loving environment, and I was lucky to also have a have a mom who said, you know, Kevin, you don't seem to like sports that much when I was in fifth grade, so maybe you should go try out for the play. I think you might like that. You should try it for the school play. Or you.

[00:36:21] Kevin

You seem to like music. Do you want to start taking piano or you like you seem to like Cyndi Lauper? Here's the record. And then I would put on lip sync performances with my sister to Cyndi Lauper and Madonna. My parents would would watch and support, and my dad and I would play Bob Dylan's songs, me be on the piano, my dad playing the guitar and singing. So I grew up in a very open and loving household. And so, yeah, I was I was very lucky to to grow up in in that environment. But at the same time, I was growing up at the height of the AIDS crisis, and all I saw on TV was that if you were gay, you were going to die. And I, I was I was teased mercilessly at certain points in my life. And so it wasn't all roses, of course, but I was lucky to have a very supportive family. And what about you, baby?

[00:37:08] Brandon

I grew up in Vancouver, Washington, which people from Vancouver refer to as Van Tuckey. There's a lot of, you know, John Deere hats and trucks.

[00:37:25] Marylee

Well, that's New Hampshire esque. That's New.

[00:37:27] Kevin

Hampshire. Yeah.

[00:37:28] Marylee

Address.

[00:37:29] Brandon

The KKK lives in the woods there and there are guns and there are people who live in the woods because they want to live how they want to live. Yeah. So growing up as a this little beautiful biracial kid who was surrounded by a white mother and white grandparents who were deaf, my mom was really young when she had me. She was 18. Both my parents and my my father is a black man from New York and my father's mother, my nana, she grew up in the Bronx. And so she she was the one who taught me about music, about New York City itself, NYU, the Rockettes and her childhood, growing up Motown and going and going to the Apollo Theater when she was growing up. So I always had this connection with New York City and knew that I would live here. She taught me about, like, the world that exists beyond what we can see. That includes magic and spirit. So having both of these grandmothers who gave me music and American sign language and dance, you know, in both kind of realms of choreography, of the hands and choreography of the body, That's what I came up with. You know, my father was in prison from the time I was 11 to the time I was 22. So, you know, that male influence was not strong. And it was like all these women who raised me. And so there's that kind of non binary energy of understanding like, yes, a male body. I own my male ness, but at the same time, the spirituality of of two spirits within me and more is very strong and going to that artistry. Yeah, I am certainly the only artist apart from maybe my grandma and my nana who had babies and children and families who couldn't really pursue their artistry. So it's, it's because of them that I am largely who I am.

[00:39:30] Marylee

All right. We've arrived at the five Questions. Brandon, tell me your favorite birthday memory. How old were you and what happened?

[00:39:43] Brandon

That's a hard one, I. My mind is split between childhood memories because I am an only child, so my birthdays are always very special. Everyone in my family, it's the one time that everyone would come together and for me and to celebrate me, which was always. And it's in the summertime, it's July 6th. So there were fireworks. And so my birthday is always a very special time.

[00:40:08] Marylee

Of course, you're a performer because.

[00:40:10] Brandon

Exactly. Talk about talk about only child syndrome. I have it. But I would say Kevin has no comment. But I will say that the summer of 2020, 2020 or 2021, we were up in in New Hampshire with Kevin's family and again coming together. And we also brought other people whose birthdays, who were whose birthdays it were was two. So it's a toss up between my own birthday celebrations with my family as a child and then meeting Kevin and and our chosen family.

[00:40:46] Marylee

Okay. Kevin, if you could wake up tomorrow morning and be in another time period, which one would it be?

[00:40:53] Kevin

I would love to experience the kind of late seventies, really kind of the year that I was born. If I could be the age that I am now, the year that I was born in 1977 and have a taste of that, that freedom that we were experiencing as queer people on Fire Island and disco culture and Studio 54. Like right before the AIDS crisis, we had 15 years of complete sexual freedom, really between the birth control pill and the onset of HIV and AIDS. And well, there's a renewal of that spirit happening right now, which is a conversation for another entire podcast. But I would like to experience that sense of of freedom and joy and liberation, that that was free of fear.

[00:41:46] Marylee

Okay. I'm going to ask you both this. If you were forced into a new profession, the profession that you have doesn't exist, what would it be?

[00:41:56] Kevin

I'm a storyteller first and foremost, so I can't imagine any world where I don't tell stories. So if I wasn't a director, if I wasn't directing theater and.

[00:42:07] Marylee

Film, I can't be in the arts. You can't be in the arts.

[00:42:10] Kevin

In the arts at all. I can't be in the arts and arts.

[00:42:13] Marylee

Mine would be. And I know this is going to sound totally bizarre, but I would want to it's a toss up. I would either want to be like Jane Goodall living in the jungles and communicating with gorillas, or I would want to be an FBI profiler and figure out why they do what they do.

[00:42:31] Kevin

Oh, that's so interesting. I've always thought we'd be very good at being in the CIA or the FBI, like being experts at reading body language. And I certainly I would be a teacher. I mean, I'm already a teacher. That that, to me, is sort of connected to the arts. But I would I would be so happy teaching full time and passing on the knowledge and the things that I've learned. And but I would join you working with like the FBI or the CIA and like an understanding the complexity of human nature for sure. What about you? I think I'd be a lawyer. I mean, justice is so important to me. And I think as a lawyer, there's still an element of storytelling that you have to be able to be good at. Yeah, And I don't think I could live without employing things that I love. And you're very good at debating. Well.

[00:43:20] Marylee

Okay, if you were a nail polish color, what color would you be and what would the cheeky little name be?

[00:43:28] Kevin

Well, that's such a great question for me, because I just stopped biting my fingernails recently. And one of the reasons I stopped biting them because I wanted to finally paint my fingernails. So I have just started wearing nail polish for the first time in my life. At 45 years old, I feel so much like myself. So I'm just going to go with living in the moment. I would be wearing what I'm wearing right now, which is a kind of gold, glittery, sparkly nail polish, and I would call it what should I call it, baby? Oh, I don't know. Studio 54. Studio 54.

[00:44:03] Marylee

Oh, perfect.

[00:44:04] Kevin

I love it. What about you? Well, I. So I'm a mermaid at heart and in real life. So the first mani pedi that I ever got was in Virginia Beach, and it was color changing. And so you put it on and it's gold with like sparkle flecks in it. And then you go into the water or go into cold water and it turns like gorgeous turquoise. And it was on my hands and toes and I was just like, I want this color all the time. It was so satisfying. So I and I would call that Mermaid or Splash or something like that.

[00:44:40] Marylee

Thank you so much.

[00:44:42] Kevin

Oh, thank you. You're such a joy. Thank you for all the work that you're doing and getting all of these beautiful ideas. It's so nice to meet you. And let's meet in person for, you know, a yoga session or a cocktail or both. And I'm so happy to know I'm.

[00:44:55] Marylee

Very close to freedom. New Hampshire. And now here's what struck a chord with us. Every week here at Stages podcast, we get emails and notes. We get tagged on social media. We see most, if not all of them. They don't go unnoticed. And Steph and I really, truly appreciate them. The other evening, I was at a yoga class. I got there a little early and I was sitting on my yoga mat checking social media. And yes, I'm aware I should not be sitting on my yoga mat checking social media, but I was. And I read a DM from someone named Caden and it really touched me. Caden thanked us for, quote, putting our energy and vulnerability into the world, and that line made me cry. So now I'm sitting on my yoga mat, checking my social media and openly crying. And yeah, I'm aware I'm a terrible, terrible yoga student, but it made me pause for the rest of that hour long class. I kept coming back to the word vulnerability in between each pose and every time I did, I would well up. Thank goodness the room was dark and there were no mirrors because vulnerability is scary. I had a very observant friend tell me once that I never show when I'm hurt. I just go straight to angry.

[00:46:10] Marylee

And she said that I should try and see what lies between sadness and anger. And I said, No, I don't want to know what lies between sadness and anger. That's why I go straight to angry, because what lies between them is vulnerability. And as I said, that's a scary thing. So I've always had this very strong connection to animals. And when I was a kid, if I felt sad or lonely, I would just go to my animals. And anyone who has pets know it's easy to cry with Adobe dog or to snuggle with a purring cat. That connection was always easy. But with humans, not so much. I didn't trust people. Animals show you when they're about to bite. I've talked about going up to see the gorillas in Rwanda, and I literally cannot stop myself from bursting into tears when I am near them. I look around at the small group of people who made that climb to be near these beautiful black fur filled creatures, and they're all mesmerized. They inch closer and closer. They try to make eye contact and connect with them. And I think that's what really touches me, that desire to connect. But it's peppered with the realization that. We destroy the very thing that we crave.

[00:47:27] Marylee

We hunt them. We take their habitat, and yet we inch, we inch closer and closer with a longing that cannot quite be defined. When I meditated on Cadence Note during that yoga class, I realized that vulnerability is the ability to show that longing openly and to other human beings. And although I still feel much safer showing it to gorillas and dogs, I realized that this podcast has opened a window for me to share. This podcast has gifted me growth in a way that I did not expect, and I am so grateful for that. I'm grateful to my cohost Stephanie, who is the perfect partner. She listens, she says what she wants, but in a very kind way. She's funny and open and supportive. She's not at all technical, Lord knows, but we can thank her husband for for smoothing over that minor flaw. And I'm grateful to my husband, Michael, who listens to my endless ramblings about every episode and has supported this endeavor since it was a tiny little spark of an idea. I am so very grateful to our guests. They come on and share so openly and from the very first episode, I feel like our guests have been remarkable. And of course, none of it matters without all of you who listen.

[00:48:47] Marylee

And I've learned that when we share our scars and our weaknesses, we create a magical space. It allows other people to explore and share. And like a lotus flower, it shows us that beauty blooms from a muddy, dark place. So I wanted to say thank you to Steph and all of our guests and all of you who take a moment to listen and to share what we're doing, and especially to Caden. I hope that we continue to grow together for a long time. And in between each episode, I hope that we ask ourselves, When was the last time I sang? When was the last time I danced? When was the last time I told my story? And when was the last time I listened to another story? Because those four things connect us. They require us to be vulnerable. And vulnerability creates the space where true connection is born. Thanks for listening, everybody. See you soon. Stages podcast is produced and edited by me, Marylee Fairbanks and Stephanie J. Block. Thank you to Allison Ahrens, our booking agent Brock Grenfell, our sound engineer, and Tina Wargo, our social media manager. Original Music by Noah Keiserman and Garrett Healy. Thank you for subscribing. Following rating and telling others about this very special podcast and we'll see you soon.

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